



Official needs to heal, not reopen, wounds

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By ESTHER WU / The Dallas Morning News

A North Carolina congressman has opened a wound that has taken this country 61 years to heal.

Rep. **Howard Coble**, R-N.C., who chairs the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security, tried to justify the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II during a Feb. 4 radio call-in show by saying "they were an endangered species."

In response to a caller, the 71-year-old Mr. Coble said he would not approve of rounding up Arab-Americans today, but it was all right to place Japanese in camps in 1942. "We were at war," he said. "For many of these Japanese-Americans, it wasn't safe for them to be on the street."

Mr. Coble later said, "I regret that many Japanese and Arab-Americans found my words offensive because that was certainly not my intent."

Several Asian-American groups, as well as La Raza, the Latino civil-rights organization, have demanded Mr. Coble's resignation. Online petitions have collected thousands of signatures from coast to coast.

But just as many World War II vets will probably identify with and support Mr. Coble. To these soldiers, the Japanese were and perhaps always will be the enemy.

However, there is a difference between the Japanese who fought in the Imperial Army and the Japanese-Americans who were law-abiding citizens of this country. During World War II, no American of Japanese ancestry was ever convicted of espionage. And the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 provided reparation of \$20,000 to each Japanese-American who was wrongfully incarcerated.

Yet, 61 years later, Mr. Coble insists the camps were created to protect the Japanese-Americans.

It would be difficult to convince **John Tateishi** of that.

Mr. Tateishi, the executive director of the Japanese American Citizens League, was only 3 when his family was forced to leave a comfortable life in Los Angeles and move into a makeshift cabin at Manzanar, Calif.

Mr. Tateishi, the youngest of four boys, said he remembers his mother walking him around the camp telling him what he could and could not do.

"There wasn't so much trauma, as there was terror and fear. I would come to think that America was outside the fence and we were not allowed inside."

Mr. Tateishi, who, like his father, was born in the United States, said, "The camps were not there for our protection. They were prisons."

He also said Mr. Coble's statement was condescending, implying that Japanese-Americans could not take care of themselves. "And it implied that Japanese-Americans had to be segregated because they could not be trusted."

U.S. Reps. **Mike Honda**, D-Calif.; **Robert Matsui**, D-Calif.; and **David Wu**, D-Ore., last week asked to meet with Mr. Coble, who has yet to respond.

"Given his culture and his history," said Mr. Wu, "I believe that Howard has moved as far as he can. If Howard is resistant to further education ... well, then it falls upon the Republican leaders in Congress and the White House to show us where they stand on this issue."

In his statement Monday, Mr. Coble tried to explain his remarks.

"The point that I was trying to make was that given the circumstances in which President [Franklin] Roosevelt found himself at the time and the information that was available to him, he made a decision which he felt was in the best interest of national security. Today we can certainly look back and see the damage that was caused because of this decision. We all now know that this was in fact the wrong decision and an action that should never be repeated.

"It is my sincere hope that this situation will be a reminder to us all that while we have made great strides to improve diversity, acceptance and understanding since 1941, there is much work left to be done."

Mr. Coble is right. There is much work left to be done – and it needs to begin with him.

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